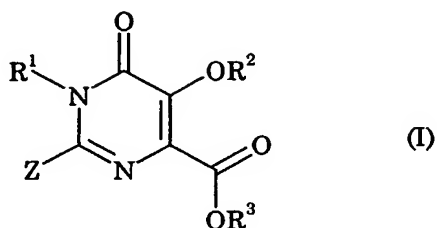


CLAIMS:

1. A compound of formula (I) below, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof:

5



wherein

10 Z represents C₂₋₆ alkynyl, aryl or heteroaryl, any of which groups may be optionally substituted;

R¹ represents C₁₋₆ alkyl or aryl(C₁₋₆)alkyl, either of which groups may be optionally substituted;

15 R² represents hydrogen; or C₁₋₆ alkyl, C₂₋₆ alkylcarbonyl, aryl, arylcarbonyl, heteroaryl, aryl(C₁₋₆)alkyl or heteroaryl(C₁₋₆)alkyl, any of which groups may be optionally substituted; and

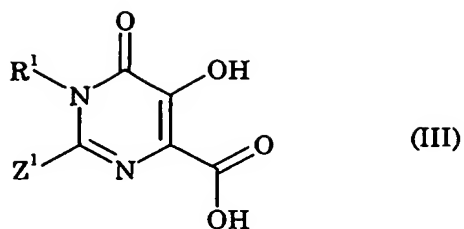
R³ represents hydrogen, C₁₋₆ alkyl, C₃₋₇ heterocycloalkyl(C₁₋₆)alkyl, di(C₁₋₆)alkylamino(C₁₋₆)alkyl, C₂₋₆ alkylcarbonyloxy(C₁₋₆)alkyl or C₃₋₇ cycloalkoxycarbonyloxy(C₁₋₆)alkyl; for use in therapy.

20

2. A compound of formula (I) as defined in claim 1, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof; provided that, when Z is unsubstituted phenyl, then R¹, R² and R³ do not each simultaneously represent methyl.

25

3. A compound as claimed in claim 2 represented by formula (III) below:



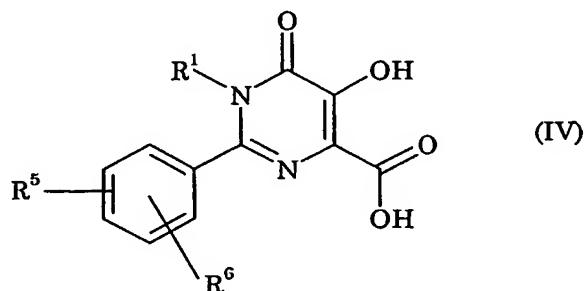
wherein

Z¹ represents optionally substituted aryl; and

5 R¹ is as defined in claim 1.

4. A compound as claimed in claim 3 represented by formula

(IV):



10

wherein

R¹ is as defined in claim 1; and

15 R⁵ and R⁶ are each independently selected from hydrogen and a substituent group of formula (II):

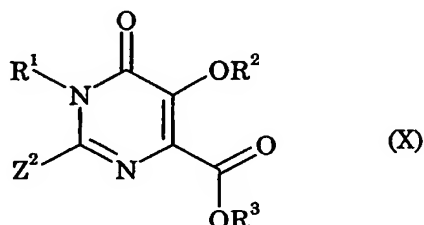


in which

20 X is selected from -NH-SO₂-, -NH-SO₂-NH-, -CH₂-SO₂-, -SO₂-NH-,
 -NH-CO-NH-, -NH-CS-NH-, -NH-CO-O-, -NH-CO-, -CO-NH-,
 -NH-CO-NH-SO₂-, -NH-CO-NH-CO-, -O-, -S-, -SO-, -SO₂-, -NH-, -CH₂-,
 -CH₂O- and -CH₂S-; and

R^4 represents aryl, aryl(C₁₋₆)alkyl, C₃₋₇ cycloalkyl, C₁₋₆ alkyl, heteroaryl(C₁₋₆)alkyl, C₃₋₇ heterocycloalkyl or C₂₋₆ alkenyl, any of which groups may be optionally substituted.

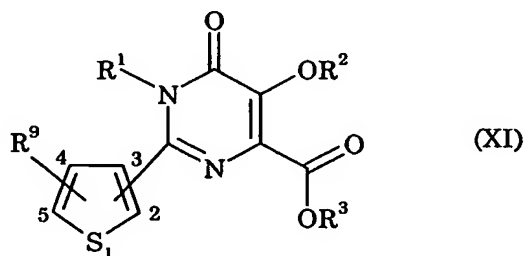
- 5 5. A compound as claimed in claim 2 represented by formula (X) below:



10 wherein

Z^2 represents optionally substituted heteroaryl; and
 R^1 , R^2 and R^3 are as defined in claim 1.

- 15 6. A compound as claimed in claim 5 represented by formula (XI) below:



wherein

- 20 R^1 , R^2 and R^3 are as defined in claim 1; and
 R^9 represents hydrogen or a group of formula (II) as defined in claim 4.

7. A compound selected from Example Nos. 1 to 46, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof.

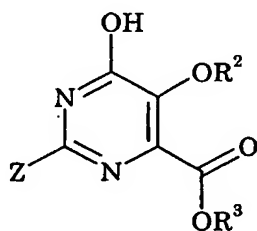
8. A compound selected from Example Nos. 47 to 49, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof.

9. A pharmaceutical composition comprising a compound of formula (I) as defined in claim 1, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof, in association with a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

10. The use of a compound of formula (I) as defined in claim 1, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt thereof, for the manufacture of a medicament for treatment or prevention of infection by hepatitis C virus.

11. A process for the preparation of a compound of formula (I) as defined in claim 1, which comprises:

(A) reacting a compound of formula (XIV) with a compound of formula (XV):



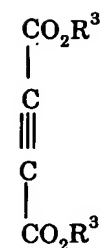
(XIV)



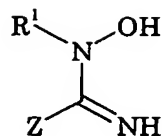
(XV)

wherein Z, R¹, R² and R³ are as defined in claim 1, and L¹ represents a suitable leaving group; or

(B) reacting a compound of formula (XVIII) with a compound of formula (XIX):



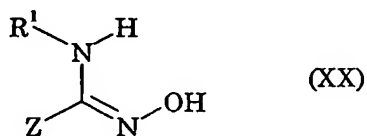
(XVIII)



(XIX)

wherein Z, R¹ and R³ are as defined in claim 1; followed by cyclisation of the intermediate thereby obtained; or

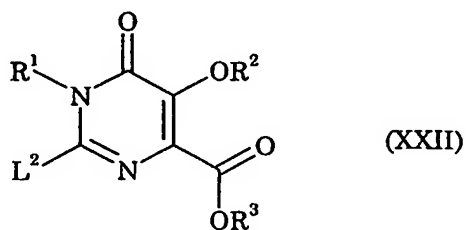
5 (C) reacting a compound of formula (XVIII) as defined above
with a compound of formula (XX):



(XX)

10 wherein Z and R¹ are as defined in claim 1; followed by cyclisation of the intermediate thereby obtained; or

(D) reacting a compound of formula Z-B(OH)₂ with a compound of formula (XXII):



(XXII)

15

wherein Z, R¹, R² and R³ are as defined in claim 1, and L² represents a suitable leaving group; in the presence of a transition metal catalyst; and

(E) subsequently, if required, converting a compound of formula (I) initially obtained into a further compound of formula (I) by standard methods.

- 5 12. A method of inhibiting hepatitis C virus polymerase and/or of treating or preventing an illness due to hepatitis C virus, the method involving administering to a subject suffering from the condition a therapeutically or prophylactically effective amount of a compound of formula (I) as defined in claim 1, or a pharmaceutically acceptable salt
10 thereof.